

Virginia Gardening

with Jim May

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Weeping trees can make a bold statement in the home landscape

Far from being sad or gloomy, weeping trees, both deciduous and evergreen can make a bold statement in the home landscape. The term weeping does sound kind of depressing and these trees are anything but depressing. Maybe the term “cascading” trees would be more appropriate.

Probably the most widely used of these trees is the weeping Higan cherry (*Prunus subhirtella* ‘Pendula’). This tree is usually grafted at about six feet tall on the rootstock. Gracefully weeping with one-half inch single pink flowers in the spring, this tree is a fast grower once established. Many cherries are described as short-lived, but this one is probably the most cold, heat and stress-tolerant of them all.

Most beech trees are beautiful to the point of being overwhelming but the Weeping European beech (*Fagus sylvatica* ‘Pendula’) is in a class by itself. These slow growers have gray smooth bark like the species, but the outstanding features are the branches. They start out horizontal for a distance and then turn down forming a large tent-like mass. Plan generations ahead when planting one of these and give it a place where it can really spread and show off its full beauty. Prune only if necessary, as its natural shape can easily be spoiled by carelessness.

Weeping katsuratree (*Cercidiphyllum japonicum* ‘Pendula’) forms a mound of gracefully weeping branches that looks like blue-green water cascading over rocks. The new leaves of this tree emerge as reddish purple and gradually change to bluish green in summer. In the fall leaves change from yellow to pale apricot. Though this tree is not easy to transplant, requiring ample moisture and careful tending the first couple of years, it is worth the extra effort.

Redbud is one of our most beautiful native trees and a true harbinger of spring. A weeping form (*Cercis canadensis* ‘Covey’) with clusters of tiny rose pink flowers in the spring is a grand sight. This tree is small, only about five feet tall with arching, contorted stems that form an umbrella-shaped crown.

The weeping form of the white mulberry (*Morus alba* 'Pendula') tends to fade in and out of popularity. Where a relatively fast-growing weeping tree is wanted, weeping mulberry can make a unique accent plant. Several varieties with weeping growth habit are available from some nurseries. Leaves are coarse and dark green and the tree is fruitless. There is no outstanding fall color and the plants have little to offer other than easy growth and weeping form.

Everyone is familiar with the weeping willow (*Salix alba*). This tree is a fast growing plant that is usually sited along water. Be cautious where you plant this one because its roots can be very invasive and destructive to sidewalks, drains and septic systems.

Sometimes called the Alaska-cedar, the Nootka false cypress (*Chamaecyparis nootkatensis* 'Pendula') is one of the best of the large group of *Chamaecyparis* species that can be used in the landscape. It has good winter hardiness and is relatively pest-free. Growth of the plant is conical, but with drooping branches and pendulous flattened twigs that give it an attractive, graceful appearance. Plants are best for open, sunny locations, but will tolerate some light shade.

One of only a few true cedars, the weeping blue atlas cedar (*Cedrus atlantica* 'Glauca Pendula') is a beautiful, flowing tree with blue foliage on cascading branches. No two of this particular cultivar ever look the same, because of staking and training when young. This tree likes ample moisture when young and should be planted out of strong winds.

One of my favorite weepers is the weeping Norway spruce (*Picea abies* 'Inversa'). This cultivar can grow 30 to 50 feet tall and spread 25 to 40 feet, depending on how it is trained. This tree is best used as a specimen plant, but it can be used as an interesting looking windbreak if planted on 20 foot centers. This tree should be staked, especially when young, or it will simply be a trailing, sprawling shrub. Norway spruce transplants easily, either containerized or balled-in-burlap. Provide ample moisture especially when young.

Two species of pine have weeping forms. The weeping white pine (*Pinus strobus* 'Pendula') and weeping Japanese red pine (*Pinus densiflora* 'Pendula') both form graceful specimens, but need to be staked. The red pine has two needles per fascicle, while the white pine has five. Each species has needles three to five inches long.

As if an upright hemlock were not elegant enough, there is a weeping form. *Tsuga canadensis* 'Sargentii' is a flowing, fine-textured plant that left unstaked, would simply sprawl along the ground. If staked, it forms a dense, irregular specimen that can spread to 25 feet wide, so plan ahead. Monitor this plant for invasion by the hemlock woolly adelgid, the insect that is doing so much damage to our native hemlocks.

Even some junipers have a weeping habit. *Juniperus scopulorum* 'Tolleson's Weeping Juniper'), is a cultivar of the Rocky Mountain juniper that can grow to 25 to 30 feet with an equal spread. Its arching branches grow up and out from the trunk, bearing foliage reminiscent of the weeping willow. It is similar to other junipers in that it requires full sun and will take dry soil conditions.

This is but a small sample of the many beautiful weeping trees grown in Virginia. Most of them are underused by homeowners. However, if planted in the right location, they can be stunning and dramatic additions to the home landscape.

Virginia Gardening with Jim May is brought to you by the Virginia Green Industry Council and the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services.